

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Memorandum

TO :

DATE: 18 March 1964

FROM :


SUBJECT: Fitness Reports

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1. I haven't really been delaying answering; I have just been out of town. This is a formidable problem you have tackled, however, and I wouldn't be above evading it. I am sure I haven't any solutions, but I do have some ideas which I am glad to pass along. In answer to your first question, "Is it likely that the Army Officer Efficiency Report with its 'expected distribution of 100 officers rated' formula is likely to be any more meaningful than our fitness reports", I don't know. I know that on its one form the Army tries to increase variability of ratings between people by use of this hundred officers formula. On another form they try to increase variability in ratings on one individual by exhortations to avoid the "halo effect". Similar formulas and admonitions could be made an integral part of the instructions on any rating sheet. Whether or not they would be effective could probably be determined best by looking at the Army results. I don't have the data, but assume we can find out what sort of distribution the ratings follow on officers' efficiency reports. But even here I am not sure that the proof of the pudding would be in the eating. What worked for the Army might not work for us. I suspect that Army officers have more in common than Agency employees, and that it is easier for an Army rater to compare any one ratee with a large group of other people. A major problem in fitness report ratings is defining a reference group. For example, someone rating an A&E psychologist might do it quite differently depending upon whether he were rating the individual against an ideal standard, against other psychologists, against other support people, or against other Agency employees of the same grade. A forced distribution of ratings among individuals works best when you have one person rating many others in the same jobs. In that case you can insist on grading by the curve or on a fixed percentage of people at each rating. If a person is only rating a few others, it is easy for him to rationalize that they are all top-notch people; and, in fact, they may be.

2. I do know that the service in the past did not have much better luck with their fitness reports than we do. About ten years ago I was involved in a large scale psychological study of Air Force officers. Hundreds of thousands of dollars and much valuable time of Air Force officers and psychologists was spent amassing a plethora of data intended to be combined to predict officer effectiveness. Not one trait was unrated nor one trauma unanalyzed, but the entire study nearly foundered on the shoals of attenuated criteria; all got the same ratings on their efficiency reports. The data could not possibly be related to good or bad performance in such circumstances. Luckily some value was salvaged because someone had had the foresight to obtain experimental, confidential ratings unrelated to the OER's. I frankly doubt that things have improved much.

3. On your second point, basically I think I am against minor changes in fitness reports except for more effective instructions. The fitness report represents a chronological history of the individual's performance, and changes in the form make for problems of confusion when a reviewer is attempting to study a personnel file. It may be completely unfeasible, but it seems to me worthwhile at least to consider the possibility of a fairly radical change. If one of the purposes of the fitness report is to provide a frank opinion of the individual's performance for the personnel file, it fails. The present system, and any close to it, I suspect, will provide mainly superficial information which does not differentiate between people nor encourage frank discussion. As long as a system requires that the individual be shown his fitness report, a superficial product will be the result. Anyone who has ever sat on a review panel knows there is more meaningful data which is usually presented orally and informally. It may be that the interest of the Agency could be served by incorporating some of this into a portion of the fitness report not shown the individual. It may also be that this smacks too much of authoritarianism. Perhaps the fitness report has more value as a motivating device and as a focus for conversation between supervisor and supervisee than as a valid rating instrument. Although I am pessimistic about results, I am greatly in favor of a revision of the system. If we can help by reviewing what is being done elsewhere and by surveying personnel research, please ask.

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